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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: January 26, 1959

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SUBJECT: Berlin

PARTICIPANTS: The Secretary

Ambassador Manlio Brosio, Italian Embassy

Mr. Carlo Perrone-Capano, Counselor, Italian Embassy

COPIES TO: Mr. Robert H. McBride, WE

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Ambassador Brosio said that important events had of course been occurring in the past few weeks and he wished to get the Secretary's reaction to the Berlin situation particularly. He said when he had been in Rome last month he had found different trends of opinion in Italy. There had been a general feeling that we should seek some new approach. He added that Fanfani had been studying these new approaches but did not believe the Italian Government should take any initiative. He said the interest of the Italian Government had been first in letting the Germans take the lead and second in obtaining U.S. views. He described a sensation that there was something moving in the German situation not only among the press and the public opinion in Italy but among diplomatic circles as well. He said that since Fanfani had indicated that there should not be any Italian initiatives, he was doubly anxious to know what U.S. views might be.

The Secretary said there was no doubt that recent Soviet demands have struck up a new round of thinking. Various governments were exploring possible new solutions to the German question. The Secretary added that he had urged that studies be undertaken here on an urgent basis. He had also let the Germans know that he felt they should also undertake such studies and give us their views. The Secretary thought that the most hopeful development would be if we could somehow find a means whereby the attraction of West Germany for East Germany could be better brought to bear. An association of an interim character which might foreshadow the end of the GDR might be possible. At least we should study this.

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EUR:WE: R.H. McBride

The Secretary referred to his recent press conference remark regarding the possibility of solutions to the German question other than through free elections. He said this remark should be taken in context. He had said free elections were the natural way to unify Germany but there might be some other way although he did not have any specific alternatives in mind. The Soviet policy was obviously, he said, to perpetuate the division of Germany and their plan for a confederation was proposed in this context, as was their peace treaty plan. However, free elections were not the only way to achieve reunification. In our own history there were various examples in connection with the achievement of our own independence, reunification after the Civil War, the admission of Alaska to statehood, which demonstrated the achievement of "reunification" by means other than elections. The Secretary stressed that he had no specific formula in mind but was seeking for a way effectively to attract the GDR. He did not believe the Soviets would permit anything which would loosen their grip on Eastern Germany. Obviously the Soviets also wanted to extend their influence to West Germany. Nevertheless it might serve a useful purpose to make some proposal even if the Soviets should reject it. The Secretary stated that he agreed with the Italian thesis that the Germans should really take the lead in this field. In the meantime we were waiting to see what they would propose and have not made any suggestions of our own.

Ambassador Brosio said he thought Italian policy on this subject was steady and would extend to the next government. He mentioned various proposals which had been suggested regarding Berlin itself such as making West Berlin the capital of West Germany or holding a referendum regarding Berlin. He noted that even though the occupation of Berlin was covered by legal rights it eventually might prove politically embarrassing. The Secretary noted that the Soviets did not worry about continued occupation in areas such as Sakhalin and the Kuriles when it suited their purpose. Ambassador Brosio referred to the reported differences of opinion between the United States and the United Kingdom on Berlin, particularly with regard to what action we should take after May 27 if discussions should fail.

The Secretary said that there was general agreement re the basic need for firmness over the Berlin issue. He was convinced there would be no war if we were prepared in fact to risk a war. The danger would be to say that, as in the case of Quemoy, Berlin was not worth a war. It was true that no individual piece of real estate was worth a holocaust at this time but if we should cede in such cases we would be destroyed bit by bit. He stressed that the French and British generally agree with us on the basic principles but that we have not achieved specific agreement on specific contingency actions. Furthermore there were almost innumerable possible contingencies not all of which were foreseeable. The Soviets could act through destroying bridges, erecting road blocs, interference with air access, through the toll system, through turning over stamping papers, etc., to the GDR, and indeed there were many other ways.

Ambassador Brosio said that he agreed that we must be willing to use strength. The Secretary said that there was some difference among the Western allies as to how we should present our position. He added that the Soviet

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position in Eastern Europe was shaky, therefore if we were compelled to recognize the GDR it would greatly strengthen the Soviets in Eastern Europe. The Soviet proposals were in effect a violation of their agreements with us and a denunciation of them. He noted that the Soviets had undertaken to permit free access to Berlin in 1945 and had reaffirmed the responsibility of the four powers in this connection at the Summit Meeting in 1955. Therefore the Secretary concluded there was not a full agreement among the four interested Western powers as to the specific actions to be taken under various contingencies. He referred to the "agency concept" which he had elaborated earlier but noted that the West Germans had not liked this idea. Furthermore the Soviets wish to make the GDR the principals rather than the agents. Furthermore, he said the question was raised, if the Soviets have responsibilities, can they designate these responsibilities to agents to carry out? He noted there was no rule of international law against this. However, the West Germans were sensitive on this point. Furthermore if the Soviet intention were to substitute the GDR as principals this was something else again. He concluded that we were studying this problem intensively here but had not reached conclusions as yet. He noted it was hoped to have four power studies on this matter here and then to discuss the matter in NATO afterwards.

Ambassador Brosio asked especially if he could continue to receive separate briefings here as these were most useful. Furthermore they kept his government satisfied and prevented any Italian initiative which he did not think would be useful at this time. He noted that if there were an international conference, the question of Italian participation might be raised since he doubted that the Soviets would again accept a four power conference but would wish to establish the parity principle and to have six or eight countries present.

Ambassador Brosio noted that while there was a special four power responsibility for Germany, if European security questions were discussed Italy at once became involved since this was the concern of all. He hoped that the Italian participation question would not be raised again but recognized that it might. In conclusion the Secretary promised to cooperate fully and indicated that he was prepared to disclose to the Italian Ambassador here our thinking and plans in connection with the German question.

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